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Gateway to the East: Decorative Art and Orientalist Imagery in Moscow's Kazan Station, 1913–1916

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Abstract: At the time of its construction, which started in 1913, the architectural design of Moscow's Kazan Station was considered by many to be out of step with the avant-garde creative energies that pervaded fin-de-siècle Russian culture. The same opinion applied to the artworks that were installed to decorate the station's interior. In the decades since, art historians have generally shared the judgments levied by those who complained about the station's supposed deficits in the 1910s. The purpose of this article is to show that, while the designs and décor of Kazan Station were indeed anachronistic—especially considering the high-tech purposes and functions of the industrial-era railroad station—the anachronism, far from reflecting a lack of awareness or innovative ability, resulted from conscious decisions on the part of Alexei Shchusev as architect, Alexandre Benois as the individual who selected artists to work on the station, and the artists themselves, including Nikolai Roerich and Pavel Kuznetsov, namely, those who built and decorated the station deliberately concealed the station's inherently modernist and utilitarian nature behind a backward-looking, past-oriented façade, both to fulfill their mission of commemorating old Russia's imperial expansion and subjugation of the East and to assuage the social and cultural anxieties often stirred up in the late 1800s and early 1900s by the construction of infrastructural assets such as railroad stations.

Keywords: Kazan Station (Moscow); Alexei Shchusev; Alexandre Benois; Nikolai Roerich; Pavel Kuznetsov; orientalism; technology; railroads

Academic Editor: K. Andrea Rusnock

Received: 15 March 2024
Revised: 31 October 2024
Accepted: 19 December 2024
Published: 2 January 2025

Citation: McCannon, John. 2025. Gateway to the East: Decorative Art and Orientalist Imagery in Moscow's Kazan Station, 1913–1916. *Arts* 14: 3. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts14010003

In the spring of 1913, architect Alexei Shchusev was awarded the commission to design and build a new railway station in Moscow, on Kalanchevskaya (now Komsomolskaya) Square. Then, as now, this was one of the busiest transport hubs in Moscow, if not the entire country, and it was already home to three major rail stations: the Nikolaevsky (known today as the Leningradsky), the Yaroslavsky, and the Riazansky.[1] It was this last named that Shchusev's new station would replace. The new station would also bear a new name—the Kazansky—and it was consciously conceived, designed, built, and decorated to serve as a symbolic and physical gateway to the East, as in the title of this essay.

In other words, the Kazan Station was a monument to Russian orientalism, and, in itself, an exercise in orientalism. That there were Russian forms of orientalism is widely understood—an excellent literature on this subject has been developing for some time[2]—so rather than belabor that point, I will pause only for a few words about the origins of this article. This piece grew out of a larger project on the life and art of Nikolai Roerich, one of the several World of Art, or *Mir iskusstva*, painters asked to design the decorative art for the station's interior. Background research on Silver Age art led me to art historian John Bowlt's assessment of the Kazan Station designs as a whole, which he refers to as "incongruous", "anachronistic", even "ludicrous" (Bowlt 1979, pp. 127–28). Bowlt sees the project as

an emphatic confirmation that, by this juncture, the *miriskusniki*, with their "moribund" style, had passed their prime. Moreover, in his opinion, the *miriskusniki* had little or no understanding of how to design public art connected with practical application. Seeking a comparative perspective, I was reading at the same time Carl Schorske's work on Europe's transition to modernity, and I was struck by an observation he makes about railway station design in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The design of practically every station of those years, Schorske points out, was marked by the same incongruity: a profound contrast between an intensely modern, technology-oriented function on one hand and, on the other, retrospective styles very much at odds with, if not actively disguising, that function.[3]

Bowlt seems, then, to have been correct in the specific point he makes. Decorating the Kazan Station was an important project by any reasonable definition, but the artists involved with it, not to mention the artistic results, were far from the avant-garde trends that were generating the greatest creative excitement in Russia at that time. (This is by no means to argue that those trends were *objectively* more creative, but rather to observe, as did writer Nina Berberova, that many among Russia's cultural elite considered "the *vin triste* of Blok, the somber madness of Vrubel, [and] the pathos of Scriabin" to have passed their prime (Berberova 1993, p. 291).) That said, it seems that there are other issues at play here beyond the perceived obsolescence of a particular artistic school. I advance as a hypothesis that Kazan Station and the decorative art within took the undeniably anachronistic forms they did not only because the World of Art Group was falling behind the tastes of the times, but also because of a wider tendency in Europe to build railroad stations (and structures similarly associated with new technology) in ways that made them seem less threatening. To go back to Carl Schorske, "the cultures of the past provided the decent drapery to clothe the nakedness of modern utility" (Schorske 1998, p. 4). In other words, the anachronism was deliberate, or at least partly so—and not just to blunt modernist shock, but for other reasons too. This essay maintains that the symbolic purpose of Kazan Station was not to welcome the future or embrace the new, regardless of what the station was used for in real life. Instead, the station was meant to celebrate the glories of the past—in the grand, neo-nationalist style that dominated the reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II—and it was intended equally to celebrate Russia's conquest of, and dominance over, the East. In essence, Shchusev and the artists who worked with him succeeded in doing exactly what they set out to do, and were asked to do, regardless of what one might think of their agenda, its cultural relevance (or lack thereof), or its political shortcomings. In laying out its argument, this essay will concentrate mainly on the art itself, recognizing that there is more light to be shed on this question by examining other facets of the Kazan project, such as formal agenda setting, the physical layout of the station, or the nuts and bolts of planning and construction.

Announcements about the Kazan Station project were made in the arts journal *Apollon* in May 1913. Once Shchusev received the commission to build the station, a committee headed by Alexandre Benois—generally recognized as among the most erudite of Russian painters—was struck to choose which artists would provide designs for the interior decoration. Among those selected were Boris Kustodiev, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Ivan Bilibin, Nikolai Roerich, Pavel Kuznetsov, Benois himself, and his niece and nephew, Zinaida Serebriakova and Evgeny Lanceray.[4] Installation of the décor was largely complete by 1915–1916, then interrupted by the worsening military situation during World War I. In the end, not all the artists' designs were actually used, and there is more than a little confusion as to which works were actually rejected, as opposed to those that failed to appear because the war interfered with the project.[5] Whatever the case, all the artists chosen in the first instance were affiliated with the World of Art Society, even though this group was no longer as tightly knit as it once had been. Several, including Kuznetsov and Roerich, were

friends with Shchusev or had worked with him before, and all met with Benois's approval (even Roerich, despite their well-known mutual antagonism). Patronage and personal connections, then, seem to have had more to do with the selection process than actual experience with this sort of enterprise. Most of these artists had fulfilled architectural commissions before, but mainly to provide artwork for hotels, private homes, and churches, not ultra-utilitarian public spaces. (Even Shchusev, at this stage of his career, can hardly be considered a modernist of that type.) Prominent among this group were several painters renowned for their treatment of Russia's pre-Petrine past—Bilibin, Kustodiev, and Roerich, for example—and at least a couple known well for dealing with the "Orient" in their art, such as Kuznetsov and, once again, Roerich. How much this reflects a deliberate choice is uncertain, but it seems safe to suppose that it factored at least somewhat into the decision.

From that fact, it is possible to draw some basic conclusions about what Kazan Station was meant to say about time and space. To return to this essay's point of departure, architect and artists, consciously or semi-consciously, attempted to conceal as much as possible the fundamentally modern character of the building they were working on. It has already been noted how common it was throughout Europe for the technological novelty of the railroad to disturb those in whose cities stations were built—hence the tendency for them to look like fairy-tale castles, Roman temples, Gothic cathedrals, and Greek acropoleis.[6] But this sense of unease was about more than ambiguous feelings regarding technological progress. Both in Russia and Europe as a whole, railroad travel and railroad building had many potentially unsettling, even frightening, social and cultural effects. The railway accelerated urbanization and industrial development. It empowered privately owned enterprise vis-à-vis the state, and, as Honoré Daumier's 1863 canvas *Third-Class Carriage* shows us, it helped to reorder the way different classes interacted with each other and defined their own status. To borrow a term from social historians Jeffrey Richards and John MacKenzie, and also the work of Christopher Ely, railroad stations in particular created new urban spaces that served as "nodal points" for community building in various ways.[7] London's Vauxhall Station—which, of course, inspired the Russian word *vokzal*—remains one of the earliest and most famous examples of these "nodal points". In the Russian case, it has also been long understood that conservatives in and out of government fretted during the late nineteenth century about the potentially democratizing effects of the railroad. All sorts of generalized anxieties about modernity were associated with railways in Russia—a sentiment reflected symbolically in the climactic suicide by train depicted in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

For all these reasons, not to mention the aesthetic agendas of Shchusev, Benois, and their colleagues, retrospectivism was the order of the day when it came to Kazan Station.[8] When one looks at the square itself and the stations on it at the time, this comes as no shock. The first, Nikolaevsky, which joined Moscow with St. Petersburg, had been built between 1844 and 1851 by Konstantin Ton, architect also of the corresponding station in St. Petersburg. Even though Ton tried to respond in Moscow to complaints by Nicholas I that the Petersburg station had not projected an image modern enough, Nikolaevsky Station still looked at the turn of the century like something from the Italian Renaissance: Western, yes, but still retrospective (R. M. Haywood 1998, p. 209). Jumping ahead to the *fin de siècle*, the prevailing style was intensely nationalist and neo-Romantic, a trend seen in Fyodor Shekhtel's 1907 revamping of Yaroslavsky Station. By the time Shchusev et al. started working on the Kazan Station, Kalanchevskaya Square was thickly layered with anachronism. And where official public art was concerned, the ethos was overwhelmingly historicist. So, whatever one might think about whether style really suited function here, Kazan Station was bound to commemorate Russia's historical grandeur, and if that meant

structures looking like old kremlin towers and medieval battlements rising up next to the tracks, so be it.

This temporal axis—celebration of the past—intersected with a geographic one as well, because the station's iconography, starting with its name, made multiple and not-so-subtle references to Russia's mastery over the East. This was a signal achievement of the past, and it was a continuing priority for the present and the future (if one could manage to forget Russia's recent and humiliating defeats at Port Arthur and Tsushima during the Russo-Japanese War). In a literal, infrastructural sense, Kazan was a gateway to the East, but connotations ran much deeper than that. The symbolic association of Kazan with eastward expansion and martial prowess went back at least three-and-a-half centuries, beginning no later than Ivan the Terrible's subjugation of the Tatar Khanate of Kazan in the 1550s: a nation-changing event that opened up the East as a whole to Russian expansion. Ever since the sixteenth century, the Kazan region has been seen as a cultural dividing line, the place where European/Slavic Russia ends and Asiatic/Mongol Russia begins.[9] Before stepping inside the station to look at the décor, some brief comments are in order on how the principal exterior feature likewise alluded to Muscovy's triumph over the "savage" Tatar.

Shchusev modeled the station's main tower on the Kazan Kremlin's most famous landmark, the six-tiered, 58 m tall Bashnia Siuiumbike, or the Tower of Söyembikä, the last queen of the Tatar Khanate. As it happens, there is a certain amount of controversy surrounding the architectural provenance of the Kazan Kremlin. The Tatarstan tourist industry maintains that elements of the old fortress, dating back to the tenth century, survived the Russian conquest, making the present-day kremlin a unique fusion of Volga Bulgar, Golden Horde, Tatar, and Russian architectural style.[10] In 2000, UNESCO inscribed the Kazan Kremlin into the list of World Heritage Sites, largely on that basis. However, a competing school of thought has it that the Tatar citadel was completely eradicated by Ivan the Terrible's troops and that the Kazan Kremlin is entirely a Russian creation, with the exception of the Kul Sharif Mosque, built between 1996 and 2005. Regarding this debate, the present essay will not pronounce one way or another—except where the Söyembikä Tower is concerned. According to tradition, Söyembikä threw herself off the tower bearing her name, out of sorrow for the death of her husband and the conquest of her homeland. A beautiful tragedy, except for the fact that Söyembikä died in a Moscow prison, not Kazan, and "her" tower is generally considered to have been built in the 1600s, maybe even the 1700s. Whichever version of events Shchusev held to be true—and whichever version most travelers passing through Kazan Station likely believed (or were even aware of)—the message would have been largely the same. Whether Shchusev's tower was understood to replicate a Muscovite fortification built to hold newly conquered territory or an indigenous Tatar structure linked to a drama with such strong political overtones, onlookers would be reminded of Kazan not just as a place, but also Kazan as history, because the tower was intended to recall Kazan's defeat at the hand of the victorious Russians.

The same is largely true of the interior décor. Almost all the designs were allegorical in nature, and almost none of them made any attempt to depict Asia or the "Orient" per se. In fact, to look ahead, the designs that came closest to doing so did not make the final cut. As with Shchusev's tower, the principal subject was Russia, imposing its will on Asia as object. Not all these images were expressly aggressive, but they were nonetheless imperial. Lanceray provided a ceiling design entitled *Russia Joining Europe with Asia*. Kustodiev designed the main ceiling panel for the station's restaurant, on the theme "union of Russia and Kazan"—and on whose terms that union took place is easy to guess. Human representations of geographical entities appeared in several places. Benois allegorized "Europe" and "Asia" (along with the concepts of "Labor" and "Science"), while

Serebriakova created a set of four lunettes embodying the countries of Siam, Turkey, India, and Japan (an odd choice, given the recent hostilities between it and Russia) in female form (Bowlt 1979, pp. 127–28; Petrov 1997, pp. 134–35, 232–33; Hilton 1983). Feminization of the East pervaded orientalist discourse so heavily that it does not call for extended comment.[11] What matters more for this essay's purposes is that one finds little or no effort here to engage with anything authentically Asiatic. In true orientalist fashion, Benois and the rest were painting an "East" that inhabited only the imperial imagination, and there was not even much of the so-called Scythian impulse to be found in their work. In fact, most of these pieces would have seemed more at home in the West—perhaps in a rococo palace—than in a Russian railway station. Given the artistic preferences of many of the *miriskusniki*, particularly Benois, this should perhaps be no surprise.

As a last exercise, it is instructive to compare the contributions of Nikolai Roerich and Pavel Kuznetsov, the two artists in this group who painted the East most often, and the two one would most expect to come to grips with something like a "true" East, or at least one perceived through a Scythian filter, as opposed to a more conventionally Western one. Roerich was called upon to design two large panels for the station's vestibule, and he gave Benois two scenes of conflict between Slavic Russia and the Tatar Orient.[12] First was an updated and enlarged version of *The Battle of Kerzhenets*, which he had executed in 1911, for the entr'acte curtain used by the Ballets Russes during its production of the Rimsky-Korsakov opera, *Tale of the Invisible City of Kitezh*. The crux of Vladimir Belsky's libretto—which fuses the eighteenth-century *Kitezh Chronicle* with older legends of Saint Fevronia of Murom—is that the city of Kitezh, after refusing to surrender to the Mongol horde, is transported by God to paradise, while its image continues to shimmer in the waters of Lake Svetoliar, magically preserved as a symbol of purity. Meanwhile, Russian forces meet with defeat on the field of Kerzhenets, an event Roerich imbues with both tragic portent and dynamic energy. On stage, this piece proved a tremendous success, earning no fewer than twelve ovations when it was displayed during the opera's Paris premiere, and it echoed his even splashier Ballets Russes triumph two years before, the "Polovtsian Dances" sequence of Borodin's *Prince Igor*—another work that juxtaposed Russia and the East, albeit in a more complex manner (Maes 2002, pp. 178–89; Iakovleva 1996, pp. 43–45, 129).

Almost as a companion piece to *Kerzhenets*, Roerich produced *The Conquest of Kazan*, a straightforward battle scene, with a straightforward message. Operating here is a historical continuum: the viewer is taken from a defeat that, while mythical in its specifics, is set against the real backdrop of the thirteenth-century Mongol invasion, to a victory in the sixteenth century. This represents a measure of payback and a complete reversal of the flow of power across the Eurasian expanse. Elsewhere, Roerich—who was fascinated by the notion of Russia as a unique crossroads culture linking Europe and the East—dealt with Asiatic themes in ways that allowed for greater fusion and interplay. But not here, where Russia triumphs utterly. And in case any doubt remains as to the central point, there is an iconographic conceit hovering over the action in the top center: a dexter hand proper, naissant from a cloud in sinister base, holding a sword flamberge, to use the heraldic terminology. This is a ubiquitous motif throughout Europe, and it is interpreted in various ways, all of which boil down to the message "our victory is God's will".

Roerich's pieces can be usefully contrasted with those completed by Pavel Kuznetsov, formerly of the Blue Rose group and a relative newcomer to the World of Art.[13] Kuznetsov already had a reputation for painting Central Asia, in a style not dissimilar to that of Armenia's Martiros Saryan, whom he knew well and with whom he had exhibited. His approach to the Kazan project stands out in contrast to everyone else's—not just in terms of idiom and composition, but fundamental philosophy as well. What Kuznetsov proposed to do was to paint the Asiatic parts of the Russian Empire themselves. And even starting with

the premise that no outsider can devise a pure representation of the "other", Kuznetsov, of the Kazan Station artists, made the best and most deliberate effort to do just that. Moreover, his imagery had nothing to do with war, conquest, or colonization. He turned in at least two designs: *Asian Bazaar* and *Gathering the Fruit* (there may have been others, but the documentation is unclear) (Stupples 1989, pp. 142–43). These are said to have resembled Kuznetsov's Bukhara paintings—essentially "idyllic" and reflecting the "bounty of a generous natural world," to use the words of his biographer Peter Stupples. Again, these are the most "Asiatic" of the pieces meant to decorate a station whose symbolic associations had mainly to do with Asia. And yet, when the Kazan art was installed, Kuznetsov's contributions were not among those included. They ended up instead in the private collection of T. V. Ushkova, wife of the Moscow tea merchant Mikhail Ushkov. The most tempting, and the most common-sense, explanation for Kuznetsov's exclusion is obvious: his designs failed to serve the station's intended purpose, which was to stand as a monument to Russia's imperial sway over Asia, not to commemorate anything about Asia in and of itself. It was a definite irony—although how keenly Kuznetsov felt it is difficult to guess.

When the Kazan Station finally opened, looking like a fortress from some long-forgotten fairy tale, it was received well by some, but those of the avant-garde reacted exactly as one would expect. Those who felt that the station's appearance should have mirrored its modern function disparaged it—and the art within it—roundly. "The locomotives themselves are ashamed", cried out a mortified Kazimir Malevich. "They blush at being surrounded by these fauns, naiads, and Greek gods" (Malevich 1918).

Such outcries (and Malevich was hardly alone in his opinion) bear out the consensus among art historians that the Kazan Station was indeed out of step with the newer and more energetic cultural trends that were coming to dominate the art scene on the eve of World War I. It should be noted that symbols drawn from the distant past were hardly alien to such modernist styles as Cubo-Futurists, Suprematists, Constructivists, and the like, all of which made use of revivalist motifs to an extent only recently appreciated (Taroutina 2018). Moreover, avant-garde scorn for the design and décor of Kazan Station arose not just from stylistic disagreements, but also from left-wing political objections to the project's glorification of Russia's nationalist impulses and imperial ambitions. All the same, there is no doubt that the Kazan Station that took shape in the imperial twilight lagged behind contemporaneous developments, both architecturally and artistically. (And politically, as witnessed by the Soviet regime's eventual removal and, in some cases, destruction of the original décor.) It did so, however, not because of an *inability* on the part of its architects and artists to keep up. As this essay has suggested, all evidence suggests that the lagging behind stemmed instead from a deliberate *choice* not to keep up.

Funding: The larger project from which this essay derives was funded by various sources, including the National Endowment for the Humanities (United States), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada), the American Historical Association, and the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, as well as by research stipends from the University of Saskatchewan and Southern New Hampshire University.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 For Moscow's expansion as a center of transport and industry during the turn of the century—a phenomenon that did much to provide the impetus for the building of the Kazan Station—as well as for background material on railroad building in Russia, see (Brower 1990; Colton 1995, pp. 11–70; R. M. Haywood 1969, 1998; A. Heywood 1999, pp. 13–23; Ruble 2001, pp. 72–80; Symons and White 1972, pp. 46–74).

2 For a small but representative sample, see (Bassin 1998, 1999; Brower and Lazzerini 1997; van der Oye 2001; Sharp 2006; Warren 2016; Taroutina and Leigh 2023).

3 Schorske (1998, pp. 4–5, 45, 87). Making the same point is (Meeks 1956).

4 See *Apollon* 5 (May 1913): 46; and 6 (August 1913): 50. More commentary followed in *Apollon* 6–7 (August–September 1915): 96. The May 1913 issue mistakenly reported that Roerich had been slated to help design Moscow's Kursk Station, rather than the Kazan Station. Also, see (Burliuk 1913, p. 18). For more recent commentary, see Bowlt, op. cit.; (Brumfield 1983, pp. 337–39, 355; Petrov 1997, pp. 98–100, 134–35, 144–45, 194–95, 202–3, 208–9, 224–25, 232–33; Sarabianov 1990, p. 304.)

5 For instance, Petrov (1997, pp. 98–100, 202–3) refers to the project as "unrealized", and asserts that only Benois's and Lanceray's designs were used by the time construction was completely finished in the 1940s. By contrast, Roerich, while in emigration, spoke repeatedly in his diaries and letters of his completed panel, and especially of his anger when, in 1933, the Soviets removed them from the station. See (Rerikh 2000, pp. 370–71, 419–20, 431, 442, 458; Rerikh 2002, pp. 66, 205–7, 249, 256, 474, 523). Rupen (1979) adds to the uncertainty by speaking of Roerich's designs as having been torn down in 1919–1920.

6 In addition to the works cited above by Meeks and Schorske, see (Kellett 1969; Mumford 1961, 1963; Ratcliffe 1988, pp. 224–34; Roth and Polino 2003; Williams 1990).

7 (Richards and MacKenzie 1986). I am indebted to conference presentations by Christopher Ely on railroad stations in reform-era Russia for alerting me to this line of inquiry overall.

8 Brumfield, *Gold in Azure*, pp. 337–39, 355.

9 For a beginning, see (Romaniello 2012; Evtuhov et al. 1997; Ross 2020).

10 For example, the official website of the Republic of Tatarstan (www.tatar.ru/english/00001231_d.html, accessed on 31 October 2024). Also, see the World Heritage Center website maintained by UNESCO (whc.unesco.org/sites/980.htm, accessed on 31 October 2024).

11 Begin, for example, with Said (1978), passim.

12 On Roerich, see especially McCannon (2022).

13 On Kuznetsov in general, see Stupples (1989).

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